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GENERAL FOCH SEIZES THE OFFENSIVE

Ludendorff's Exposed Position in His Three Salients Gave Allies Their Chance to Attack—Germans Have Suffered a Paralyzing Defeat, Their Worst of War

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The past two weeks have seen one of the most momentous changes in the whole history of the World War. Having exploited his victory between the Marne and the Aisne to its full measure, but wisely declining to repeat the old blunders of the Somme and of Flanders, Marshal Foch on August 8 shifted his field of action to the familiar battleground of the Somme and opened the first Allied offensive of the campaign of 1918. By this blow he definitely indicated that he regarded the time as come when the balance had shifted to the Allied side, and that the hour was over when inferiority in numbers and of material condemned the Allies to the defensive on the Western front.

Foch's attack in Picardy resembled in many ways his counter offensive between the Aisne and the Marne, but in a military sense it was quite a different thing. In the earlier operation Foch struck to bring to a halt and throw back a dangerous German offensive, and his blow was directed at the flank of a German army engaged in an operation organized and planned by Ludendorff. His stroke was a defensive blow, and it had exhausted its possibilities when it had compelled the German to evacuate a certain area of ground, part of it taken in the operation which was still in progress, part of it taken in any earlier offensive designed to prepare the way for the later undertaking.

But in Picardy Foch was acting not to block a German operation, but to take advantage of the situation in which earlier German operations had placed the foe. His hands were free; he could attack where and when he chose; and the disorganization of the enemy due to the recent defeat gave him that security against a German counter blow which has not been possessed before this year. He had, moreover, the great advantage of having used far fewer troops in the Second Battle of the Marne than his enemy. He had needed much smaller numbers to take advantages offered by enemy blundering. Ludendorff had been compelled to draw troops from the north to aid those in the south, but Foch had not been compelled to make corresponding drafts upon the British, and as a result he had the British army intact for the new effort, while the American contributions had enabled him also to save certain French reserves for the Somme attack.

The Third Battle Of the Somme

Now, to understand the development of the Foch offensive in Picardy, which will undoubtedly be known as the Third Battle of the Somme, it is necessary to go back for a moment to the progress of the campaign in this region. On March 21 the Germans struck at the point of junction between French and British lines along the Oise and thence northward to the Scarpe, with the obvious intention of driving a wedge between the British and French armies, routing the former and rolling them back north of the Somme. Thus defeated and contained behind the Somme, the Germans calculated that the British would be eliminated from the campaign and their own hands would be free to dispose of the French.

The blow was delivered by Hutier, who used upward of forty divisions and scored the greatest victory on the Western front since the warfare of positions began. But his success fell just short of being decisive. Gough's Fifth British Army was practically destroyed; a great gap was opened between the British and French armies; but owing to the rapidity with which French troops were brought up and the skill with which they were handled by Fayolle the gap was closed and the German thrust came to an end east of Amiens, but near enough to the city to interrupt railroad communication and cripple Allied communications.

A subsidiary attack in Flanders led to an unexpected success, due to the collapse of the Portuguese on the line, and placed Ypres in peril. But again the arrival of French forces at a critical moment averted disaster. Ludendorff now calculated that he had disposed of the British, just as Napoleon, after Ligny, regarded Blücher and the Prussians as out of the campaign. As Napoleon turned against Wellington, Ludendorff now directed his attention against Pétain and the French armies and presently won his great victory on the Aisne which carried him to the Marne. Not until his fourth offensive, that directed at Compiègne, did he encounter any real disappointment, but even this partial failure netted him a certain amount of valuable ground and materially widened the salient which he occupied east of Amiens. Convinced that the French were now at the point of exhaustion, he turned to the Marne and opened his fifth offensive, which ended so disastrously for him.

The two offensives against the British had gained for Ludendorff exceedingly valuable ground, provided he chose to use this ground either for an advance against the Channel ports or against Paris, but it was very dangerous ground to occupy if he were suddenly forced to abandon the offensive and return to a defensive campaign. This situation was remarked by all at the time, but it was not immediately of more than passing importance, because the offensive still remained with the German. Still, for several months military men have been watching the narrow pockets facing Amiens and Calais and speculating as to what might be their future.

All three pockets, that in Flanders, that in Picardy and that between the Marne and the Aisne, which has recently been abolished, were equally vulnerable to any flank attack; they were narrow; the lines of communication in them were near the sides and a relatively slight advance on either side, where the pockets rejoined the main front, would put all the ground in the salient under Allied fire and expose the troops within them to the danger of envelopment and capture, and in any event necessitate an enforced retreat out of them.

Ludendorff's Three Stepladders

The situation of Ludendorff may be illustrated by a simple figure. If you are attempting to climb in a window a rickety stepladder will be of very great assistance, and as long as your opponent, who is trying to keep you out of the house, is trying to stop you at the window you need have little apprehension about the ladder. But if the man in the house presently gets help and leaves his helper to handle you at the window while he comes outside and starts to pull down the ladder, then it is time to get off the ladder; indeed, the time to get off is before he reaches it, if possible.

Now, in a sense, this is what happened. Ludendorff has not one but three stepladders in his three salients, and just as long as he could hold his enemy to fighting at the top of the ladders and from the house the salients did not worry him. But at the Marne Foch managed to upset one ladder and the result was immediate disaster. Then, before Ludendorff could bring himself to abandon the second or Picardy salient, Foch repeated the success. Meantime, as we have seen in the rather bald official reports, Ludendorff has been climbing down off the third ladder; that is, he has been drawing out of the Flanders salient.

To put the thing in a military sense and indicate how clearly military men perceived the situation I will quote now the comments made to me by Colonel Paul Azan, of the French army, during the German drive toward Amiens last April. As a forecast of the future difficulties in store for the German within the Amiens salient they have present value. Colonel Azan said:

"The present German situation is by no means free from grave dangers for the enemy. Attracted by the bait of Amiens and of the railroad thence to Paris, they are thrusting forward toward this objective and have thus created a salient dangerous to themselves. The conquest of a zone of land, however large, is of no advantage if the acquisition be too costly or if it places the troops which occupy it in an unfavorable place.

"Both these conditions apply to the situation of the Germans to-day. Not only have they lost very heavily, but they run the risk of being exposed to cross fire, and if a counter offensive is launched at the base of their salient they are in danger of having their first line troops taken from behind and cut to pieces. Their troops are obliged to concentrate in the salient if they intend to enlarge it, so that their effort to increase their success will expose them to the gravest disasters.

"When such a salient cannot be enlarged it is best to evacuate it, but a retreat is almost as dangerous as a continuation of the attack. If the Anglo-French army watches its chance the enemy cannot evacuate the salient without being attacked, and it is well known that an attack during a retreat may bring on a disaster.

"Thus General Foch seems to hold the prey in his hands. The situation as it exists to-day (April 9) was certainly not foreseen. It is not the result of strategic calculations, but it may turn to the advantage of the Allies.

"The reason why the general 'reserve army' of the Allies has not yet intervened is probably that it has not yet been fully constituted. General Foch knows better than any one else how to utilize this army of reserves. He doubtless will be careful not to throw it into battle until he is certain there will not be another German attack somewhere else; he knows enough to wait until the enemy's reserves are used up in constant effort and until, little by little, his troops have been decimated by long effort. So the day he does send his reserves into action may mark the beginning of a great victory."

Why Foch Attacked Amiens Salient

"The day" Colonel Azan foresaw came when Ludendorff's defeat between the Marne and the Aisne had consumed a large portion of his remaining reserves, depressed the spirits of his army and generally changed the whole strategic situation. America had provided Foch with a number of divisions of reserves immediately available and an almost unlimited number bound to become available at regular intervals. He had spent his troops with great economy; Ludendorff had used his with extreme prodigality. It was now within Foch's power to exploit the weaknesses of his foe's positions, those positions taken not with any idea of permanent occupation, but, as I have said a moment ago, to serve as stepladders for reaching his larger objectives.

Foch chose to attack the Amiens salient rather than that in Flanders because even a small victory would restore communications through Amiens, abolish the threat to the unity between British and French armies and push the Germans away from Paris. Further than this, any considerable gain would have immediate consequences for the situation between the Aisne and the Vesle and would probably compel a general German retirement between Rheims and Noyon; that is, between the Oise and the Vesle, just west of Rheims. We all saw how the German success on the Aisne immediately forced the French to withdraw in the angle between the Oise and the Aisne and allow the Germans to come dangerously near to Compiègne; Foch calculated that he could now reverse the order of events.

The salient Foch selected to attack was in all respects comparable with the Marne salient. It faced west instead of south; this was the only difference. But a blow from the south bank of the Somme directed southward at Chaulnes was bound to have just the same effect upon all the Germans in the half circle between the Somme and the Oise as Mangin's blow toward Soissons, along the Aisne, had had upon all the German troops in the half circle between Rheims and Soissons. More than this, Chaulnes might be compared as a railroad centre or the salient with Soissons and Roye as a highway centre with Fère-en-Tardenois in the Marne salient. The chief difference in the situation lay in the fact that in the Marne salient a great army had been collected for an offensive, while in the Somme salient there were only the ordinary holding troops, which would make the German problem of retreat simpler.

British Reorganized And Ready for Blow

It was now obviously the turn of the British to take the lead and bear the burden of the fighting. The last considerable British engagement had taken place on April 29, when the German effort in Flanders had been definitely checked. For more than three months Haig's army had been refitting and reorganizing after the terrible experiences of March and April. Its losses had been replaced, its divisions brought up to full strength. Not less than ninety divisions with a numerical strength of close to 1,250,000 men were available, the strongest force Britain had put into the French field during the war.

More than this, for the offensive which was now to come the preparations had been going forward for many weeks. The Canadians and Australians, who were to be the point of the wedge, to be the "shock troops," had been for a considerable period back of the line and training for the great operation. Lloyd George has told us how the gaps in the army caused by the April and May defeats had been filled, how the lost artillery had been replaced. A British army, burning to avenge its defeats of the earlier days and emulate French and American achievements on the offensive in the Marne fighting, was now ready to step out of the lines to which it had been driven three months before.

In a measure the situation recalled the conditions of June and July in 1916. Then the Germans had gambled on four months of immunity from British interference while they reduced Verdun. Now a similar period had been gained for them by their successes against the British in the spring. They had put the British out of the reckoning for a period within which they had expected to dispose of the French, giving small heed to any American contingents. But the end of the three months saw their failure against the French in Champagne as complete as had been their failure before Verdun two years earlier, while the Americans were already playing a real part in the game.

It was always certain that if the Germans failed to dispose of the French before the British recovered from their defeats the result would be dangerous for Ludendorff. He had gambled on a decisive victory against the French and his gamble had turned out badly; he was now to pay the price of his unsuccessful risks, a price that he must have foreseen when he decided to stake all on a single blow, but a price which was bound to be a tax upon his already greatly strained resources.

Germans Were Expecting Trouble

It was clear in the first days of August that the Germans expected trouble along the Somme, for they drew back their front lines from positions west of the Avre and the Ancre and endeavored to strengthen their positions behind both of these little streams, while at the same time they executed a similar withdrawal in the point of the Flanders salient. These signs were sufficient evidence that Ludendorff recognized that the offensive had passed to Foch and that a heavy blow was coming between the Oise and the sea, but how heavy he could not foresee.

On the morning of August 8 the British all the way from Albert, north of the Somme and just east of the Ancre, to their point of junction with the French below the Amiens-St. Quentin highway, the famous old Roman road, stepped out of their lines and began an offensive. This operation was made by Rawlinson, commanding the Fourth British Army, as he had commanded the same army in the First Battle of the Somme. To the south a French army under General Debeny attacked astride the Avre, from the British flank to the vicinity of Montdidier.

There was no preliminary bombardment, only a creeping barrage, which preceded the advancing British Canadians and Australians on their rush for the German lines. A complete surprise was the result, and in the next few hours the German lines were broken on a front of a dozen miles and a huge number of British tanks were pouring through the gap, smashing German nests of machine guns and points of support, while cavalry made its first general operation on the British front of the whole period since the trench war began.

Again it was demonstrated that the element of surprise, restored to the warfare of positions by Hutier's method, was the prime requisite of success. Once more, as at Cambrai, surprise gave the British an immediate gain, but unlike Cambrai the new operation was one which had been carefully prepared with a clear view to utilizing any gains. As a result the British advance was for three days unchecked. In that time more than a dozen miles were covered, and by Saturday, August 10, British and French cavalry were ranging the territory behind the old front of the first days of the Somme in 1916, and the British troops had reached, and even at points slightly passed, the lines on which the Germans had stood on July 1 of that earlier year. Chaulnes was at least temporarily occupied by the cavalry patrols.

Meantime, the French to the south met with sharper resistance at the outset, but by Saturday had pushed east and north of Montdidier and turned the Germans out of this extreme eastern point in their line. At this moment still another French army, under General Humbert, took up the offensive from Montdidier to the Oise and began to push north and east over the ground which had seen the desperate fighting of the German advance toward Compiègne in June of the present year.

By Sunday the Germans between the Ancre and the Oise were practically on the old Somme front; their line ran fairly straight from Albert to Ribécourt, with Chaulnes changing hands at frequent intervals and Roye and Lassigny becoming hourly more in peril. By this time 36,000 prisoners and 500 captured cannon were proofs of the extent of the German demoralization. Eleven divisions had been smashed and there had been a general advance on a forty-mile front for some ten miles, with an extreme advance of upward of fifteen miles toward the north. The Montdidier salient was gone; the question was still unanswered as to where the Germans could stand, but it was becoming clear that they must eventually retire behind the upper Somme on a line from Arras, through Bapaume, Péronne and Ham to the high ground above the Oise and between Noyon and Chauny.

At this moment the Allies had definitely abolished the menace to Paris constituted by the Montdidier salient; the Oise avenue, like the Marne route, was not only barred, but doubly barred. They had cleared the Germans away from Amiens, insuring the union between the British and French armies, reopening all the vital railroad lines which meet at this city and, above all, the main Paris-Amiens-Calais line, which had been cut by indirect fire ever since the March offensive. This was a gain comparable with the clearing of the Paris-Chalôns-Nancy railroad as a result of the Marne counter offensive. Together these triumphs restored the two vital lines of railroad, which had been cut by the German offensive. The gain was incalculable, both with respect to the future security of the Anglo-French communications and the greater efficiency of Allied transport. On the larger side the only serious consequences of the German gains of the spring and early summer were now abolished; what remained was to measure the extent of the injury the Germans were still to suffer.

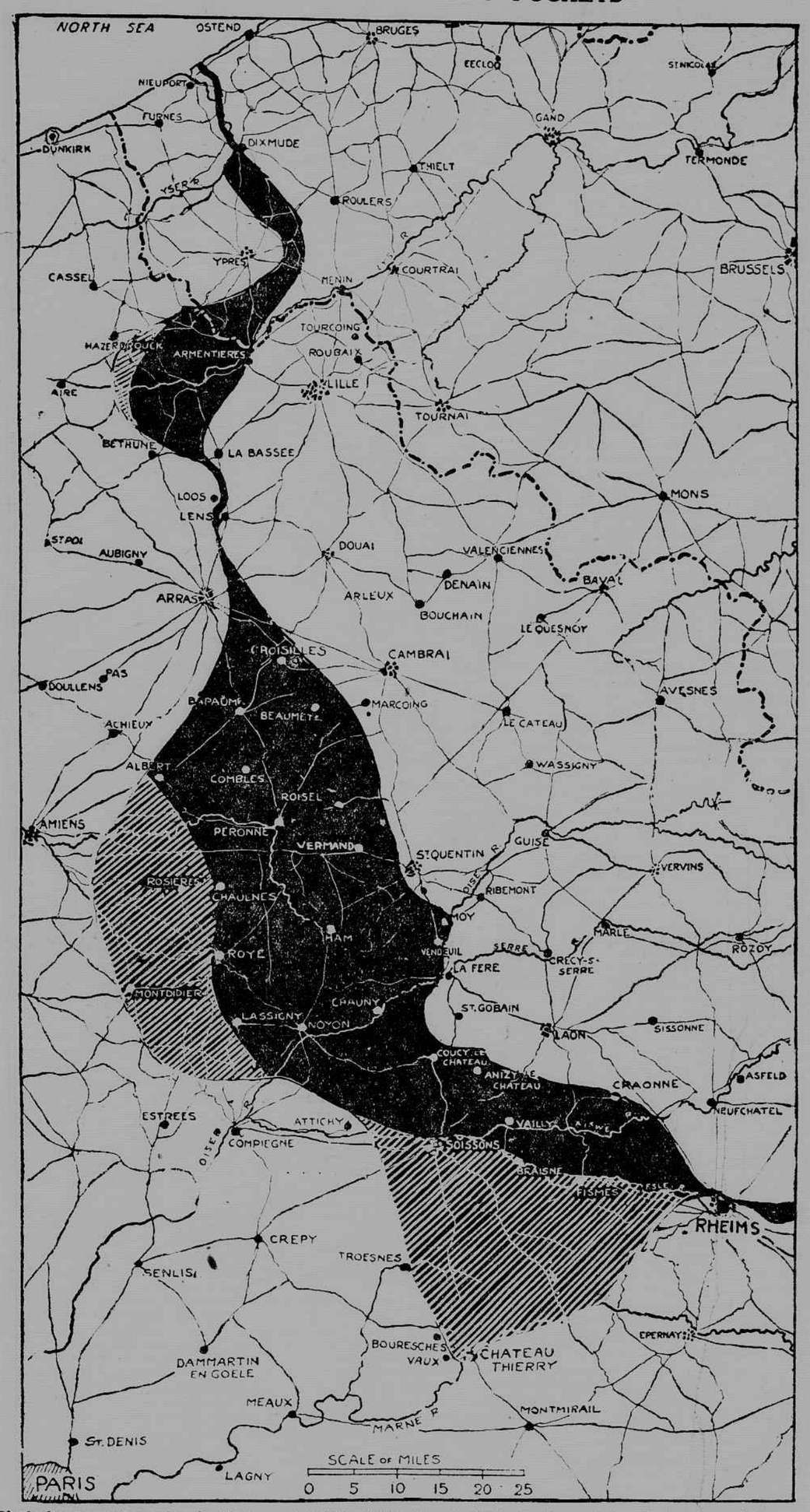
By the second blow Foch had definitely wrested the offensive from Ludendorff; he was now calling the tune and it was his foe who was doing the dancing. The whole character of the campaign had changed. It was no longer a question of whether the German advance could be checked, but how far the Allied offensive would sweep and what dislocations of the German front between Rheims and Arras were inevitable.

Worst Defeat Of the War

As I close this article on Monday, August 12, the problem set for Ludendorff is clear. Temporarily the German resistance has stiffened the German defence of the high ground between Lassigny and Noyon, and north of the Somme about Bapaume and has enabled the enemy to rally on the old front of July 1, 1916, but there are unmistakable signs that this rally is but temporary, comparable with the stand above the Ourcq in the Marne retreat. The real question is now whether Ludendorff can stand on the line of the upper Somme or must go back to the old Hindenburg line, from which he started in March. This is entirely like the other problem of the Aisne or the Vesle line in the Marne operation. If Ludendorff has to go back to the Hindenburg line then there will be a general retirement from Rheims to Arras; the Germans will have to quit the Vesle for the Aisne, evacuate much ground between the Aisne and the Oise and surrender the old battlefield of the Somme. They have already been thrust back into the desert created by them in their retreat of 1917 and have lost all real profit gained by their spring and summer campaign.

In sum, we have seen one of the great victories of the Western front, even if there be no considerable further retreat of the Germans. They have suffered their worst defeat of the war, not a defeat like the First or the Second Marne (both of these were defeats in battles of arrest, by which their own purpose was balked and they were compelled to readjust their lines), but a defeat and a paralyzing defeat, following an Allied offensive. Their whole campaign is now in the discard; what remains to be established is the extent of their retreat. Nor is it likely that even a temporary halt at the Somme or even at the Hindenburg line will mark the end for the campaign of their withdrawal. Rather it is within reason now to hope that they may be pushed to the French frontier before snow flies. For Foch is only beginning, and his American reserves are accumulating in great numbers each week.

PICKING LUDENDORFF'S POCKETS



Black shows territory taken by Germans in 1918. White lines indicate territory retaken in the recent Marne and Picardy battles.

Extent of Germans' Retreat Alone Remains To Be Determined—It Is Within Reason to Hope They Will Be Pushed to French Frontier Before Winter